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Chapter One: THE FEDERAL LAND GRANT

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These Fifty Years

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THE FEDERAL LAND GRANT

THE modern-day agricultural college with its four-year collegiate course, its high schools and short courses, its well-developed scientific research, and its extension activities, has been a development of hardly more than the last quarter century. Certainly fifty years will cover the outstanding accomplishments. After the passage of the Morrill Land-Grant Act of 1862 it was many years before the agricultural or industrial colleges (as they were often called) began to lay the foundations of agricultural education and research as they are known today.

Because the prosperity of the New World hinged to a large extent on the development of its agricultural resources, well-intentioned but often feeble attempts at agricultural instruction were frequently made. Perhaps the first record of any agricultural instruction in America is that of the Franciscan monks who in 1629 endeavored to supplement "primitive practices with the more scientific and fruitful methods of agriculture brought from the Old World" among the Pueblo Indians of the Southwest.

In 1751 William Smith issued a prospectus designed as a model for colleges in which he provided for a course to be known as the chemistry of agriculture. His plan was carried out in the Philadelphia Academy, now the University of Pennsylvania. Animal husbandry was mentioned in the original prospectus of King's College (Columbia University) in 1754, and a professorship of botany and agriculture was established there in 1792. "An attempt is made by the professor, who is a practical farmer,

to elucidate and explain the economy of plants, and affinity to animals, and the organization, stimuli, life diseases and death of both classes of beings," reads a report of this course.

President Washington was a member of the first society for promoting agriculture, which was organized at Philadelphia, March 1, 1785. In 1801 the Massachusetts Agricultural Society started a subscription which resulted in the establishment of a professorship of natural history at Harvard University in 1804. The will of Benjamin Bussey of Roxbury, Mass., proved in 1842, bequeathed half of the income of about $300,000 and 200 acres of land in Roxbury to the president and fellows of Harvard University on condition that they establish on the farm "a course of instruction in practical agriculture, in useful and ornamental gardening, in botany, and in such other branches of natural science as may tend to promote a knowledge of practical agriculture and the various arts subservient thereto." But, due to other provisions in the will, nothing was done until 1870.

In 1839 the distribution of seeds and plants thru a Congressional appropriation began, which was to result, later on in 1862, in the establishment of the United States Department of Agriculture. In 1849 the New York Agricultural Society established at Albany a chemical laboratory for the analysis of soils, manures, etc. Michigan in 1857 and Pennsylvania and Maryland in 1859 established agricultural colleges which grew to be permanent institutions. The Michigan school was the first exclusively agricultural college in the United States.

These were for the most part rather modest attempts, but they were indications that people were beginning to appreciate the necessity for more information about agriculture. On the other hand, there had been a rather insistent demand for education coming from the great mass of people. Education for the masses as well as the classes was echoed by many state legislatures and individuals.

While educational institutions had drawn on the farms and industries for students, they had passed their graduates on to other fields of activity.

The answer to the cry for higher education of a popular nature was found in the Land-Grant College idea. Probably no single idea has ever so moulded the history of higher education in the United States.

PROFESSOR TURNER AND THE ILLINOIS PLAN

The question of money constantly stood in the way of those who would provide agricultural and industrial education for the great mass of the people, and consequently the state legislatures were not at all backward about asking the Federal Government to help out by means of grants of land. The Legislature of Michigan petitioned Congress in 1850 for a donation of 350,000 acres of public lands for the establishment of an agricultural college. The Senate of New York in 1852 asked Congress "to make grants of land to all the states for the purpose of education and for other useful purposes." Other states asked for the establishment of a national institution which would do for agriculture what West Point was doing for the Army.

In Illinois Prof. J. B. Turner was promoting the idea of an institution which would do for the farmer and the mechanic what private colleges were doing for the lawyer, doctor, and clergyman. His plan called for the establishment of a university in each state in the Union, and was widely discussed. The Legislature of Illinois in 1853 was the first legislature to petition Congress to make a grant of federal lands to each state in the Union for the purpose of developing in each state one institution "for the more liberal and practical education of our industrial classes and their teachers." The Illinois plan was the one which was finally embodied in the Land Grant of 1862 and its auxiliary acts.

The agitation for popular colleges was bearing fruit and was reflected in an editorial, appearing in the *New York Tribune* February 26, 1853:

"It may now be ten years since a few poor and inconsiderate persons began to agitate in favor of a more practical system of thorough education, whereby youth without distinction of sex should be trained for eminent usefulness in all the departments of industry. They demanded seminaries in which agriculture, the mechanic arts, the management of machinery, etc., should be thoroughly taught, based on a knowledge of chemistry, geology, botany, hydraulics, etc., with a corresponding proficiency in all that pertains to housewifery, and household manufactures for female pupils." [1]

In speaking of the Illinois plan, the editorial went on:

"Here is the principle contended for by the friends of practical education abundantly affirmed, with a plan for its immediate realization. And it is worthy of note that one of the most extensive of the public land (or new) states proposes a magnificent donation of public land to each of the states, old as well as new, in furtherance of this idea. Whether that precise form of aid to the project is most judicious and likely to be effective, we will not here consider. Suffice it that the Legislature of Illinois has taken a noble step forward, in a most liberal and patriotic spirit, for which its members will be heartily thanked by thousands throughout the Union. We feel that this step has materially hastened the coming of Scientific and Practical Education for all who desire and are willing to work for it. It cannot come too soon."

PASSAGE OF THE LAND-GRANT ACT

Justin S. Morrill, representative and later senator from Vermont, was active in Congress in promoting the matter. On December 14, 1857 he introduced into the lower house of Congress the first bill for a federal grant of land to each state. Congress passed the bill in 1859, but it was vetoed by President Buchanan. Senator Wade of Ohio again introduced a bill. The legislation was finally passed and signed by President Lincoln July 2, 1862, four and a half years after Mr. Morrill had introduced his original bill.

[1] In quotations the original spelling, punctuation, and capitalization have been generally followed.

Each state had now received a grant of 30,000 acres of public land for each senator and representative in Congress. The money derived from the sale of these lands was to be invested in securities bearing not less than 5 per cent interest and the income was to be used for the support of at least one college where the leading object should be to teach agriculture and mechanic arts.

This legislation is known as the Morrill Act, because of the activity of Senator Morrill in promoting it. In commenting upon his desire for such legislation Mr. Morrill stated that such institutions had already been established in other countries and were supported by their governments, but they were confined to agriculture, a curriculum which Mr. Morrill considered too limited. "This for our people with all their industrial aptitudes and ingenious inventions appeared to me unnecessarily limited," Mr. Morrill stated. His further reasons are given below:

"First, that the public lands of most value were being rapidly dissipated by donations to merely local and private objects, where one state alone might be benefited at the expense of the property of the Union.

"Second, that the very cheapness of our public lands, and the facility of purchase and transfer, tended to a system of bad farming, strip and waste of soil, by encouraging short occupancy and speedy search for new homes, entailing upon the first and older settlements a rapid deterioration of the soil, which would not be likely to be arrested, except by a more thorough and scientific knowledge of agriculture, and by a higher education of those who were devoted to its pursuit.

"Third, being myself the son of a hard-handed blacksmith, the most truly honest man I ever knew, who felt his own deprivation of schools, I could not overlook mechanics in any measure intended to aid the industrial classes in the procurement of an education that might exalt their usefulness.

"Fourth, that most of the existing collegiate institutions and their feeders were based upon the classic plan of teaching those only destined to pursue the so-called learned professions, leaving farmers and mechanics and all those who must win their bread by labor to the haphazard of being self-taught or not scientifically taught at

all, and restricting the number of those who might be supposed to be qualified to fill places of high consideration in private or public employments to the limited number of the graduates of literary institutions. The thoroughly educated, being most sure to educate their sons, appeared to be perpetuating a monopoly of education inconsistent with the welfare and complete prosperity of American institutions.

"Fifth, that it was apparent, while some localities were possessed of abundant instrumentalities for education, both common and higher, many of the states were deficient and likely so to remain unless aided by the common fund of the proceeds of the public lands, which were held for this purpose more than any other."

GRANTS IN THE SEVERAL STATES

At last each state had received a perpetual endowment for at least one college, which was to offer courses of a practical character. With the exception of 10 per cent which might be expended for the site of a college, all the money derived from the sale of the lands or land scrip granted to the various states was to be invested as a permanent endowment fund. In some cases entirely new colleges were established. In other states there was a wild scramble among the existing colleges for the land grant money.

In Michigan the land grant went to the Michigan Agricultural College, which had been established a few years before. In Massachusetts the money was given partly to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and partly to an institution created for the purpose of affording agricultural instruction, at Amherst. In some states the money was given to state universities already established, as in Wisconsin and Minnesota, while in other states institutions which were to become great state universities were established thru the act. The latter was the case in Nebraska.

In most of the eastern states there was not, of course, sufficient public domain available for entry to provide 30,000 acres of land for each senator and representative in Congress. The states that had public lands within their

borders could take up and locate the land. The states that did not have this public land were issued scrip, representing land acreage. The state receiving this scrip could not locate land in another state, but it could sell this scrip to individuals, and the purchaser might take up government lands in any state.

Had every state handled this matter as well as it might, the foundation for almost self-sustaining educational institutions might have been laid everywhere. In many cases land and scrip were bartered away for next to nothing. Within fifty years these lands were selling at from $50 to $100 an acre. In fact, the apparent lack of foresight with which the matter was handled was responsible for the demand for more federal money, which led to the Second Morrill Act of 1890.

The market was flooded with this land scrip. Many of the states disposed of their scrip at less than $1 an acre. Indiana received $212,238.50 for its 390,000 acres. Louisiana sold its 209,920 acres at 87 cents an acre. Maine sold its scrip, representing 210,000 acres, for $116,359.20. Tennessee sold its scrip for a little more than 90 cents an acre. So it went, almost without exception, throughout the entire list of states receiving scrip.

But there was one big exception and that exception was Cornell University. Ezra Cornell, a benefactor of Cornell College for whom Cornell University was later named, saw New York's land scrip, representing 989,920 acres, being sold out at a little more than 50 cents an acre. Of course no state could of itself locate lands in another state, but there was nothing to prevent an individual from doing so. Mr. Cornell made a contract with the state to buy this scrip and locate the land. He located 500,000 acres of the finest timberlands in Wisconsin. Up to July 1, 1921, the total endowment from the sale of lands amounted to $5,737,698.04, with 280 acres of land still remaining unsold.

The states that were able to locate the lands within their own domain did much better as a rule than the states

receiving the scrip. That was because they could hold the lands until they would bring a better price. Those that held their land the longest naturally were able to secure the largest endowment. The states entering the Union later, and for which provision for similar grants of land was made, tended to keep their lands, rather than the money derived from them, as in the cases of Idaho and Arizona.

Kansas derived $491,746 from the sale of 82,315 acres of land. A deficit of 7,686 acres was made up by Congress in 1907 and this remains unsold. Iowa received $592,463.46 and none of its land remains unsold. It must be remembered that the representation of the western states in Congress was by no means equal to that of the eastern states, and consequently their respective land grants were smaller. But so much better did they handle things that the total amount of endowment received by many western states exceeded that of apparently more fortunate eastern states. The consideration of Nebraska's record in handling its educational land grant will be left until later.

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